

Christmas 1A Sermon
Matthew 2:13-23
January 1, 2023

“What are we running from?”
Rev. Dr. Brandon S. Perrine

Now after [the wise men] had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, ‘Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.’ Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, ‘Out of Egypt I have called my son.’

When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: ‘A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.’

When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, ‘Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child’s life are dead.’ Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, ‘He will be called a Nazorean.’

A dream. A warning. An escape to a foreign land in the middle of the night. An obsessed tyrant. Weeping and wailing mothers. The lifeless bodies of children...this story is known as the Flight to Egypt and the Massacre of Holy Innocents. The power-crazed Herod had banished his first wife and their son and executed his second wife, his mother-in-law, brother-in-law, and three of his own sons so it's not hard to imagine that he would stop at nothing to preserve his rule—even ordering the deaths of all male children under two years of age in Bethlehem.

Some Bible stories are easier than others to connect with. It's not so hard to imagine myself a shepherd or even a cow in the stable on that very first Christmas. I can imagine laying there in the damp straw, the moist air from my large nostrils evaporating in puffs of mist on the cold night, the light of a single lantern, dancing in the shadowy corners of my home, while a baby gurgles and coos in my manger. I can imagine seeing the couple—the tired and worried look in the man's eyes, the exhausted yet maternal joy on the woman's face as she reclines in the straw, resting her head on my gently heaving side. It's not hard to imagine being a cow in the nativity story, but to be honest, it's a little difficult to imagine myself in *this* story.

I have never had a warning dream from angels and awakened with a start to gather my young family and steal away in the night. I don't know that heart clenching fear. I have never watched as something I brought into the world is ripped from my arms. I have never had to do the unthinkable, to follow orders from a cruel and paranoid king. Perhaps you can relate, in some way to these characters—to their fear, their pain, their loss, their inner conflict...I do, however, know what it's like to run from a problem, but where Joseph and Mary and the infant Jesus were able to outrun theirs, mine have tended to follow me.

How many of us have ever “dealt” with an unhealthy romantic relationship, a bill collector's phone calls, a nagging toothache, a funny noise from the car, a difficult work relationship, a mounting honey-do list at home, or persistent sadness by actively avoiding it or simply running in

the opposite direction? We tend to bury ourselves in our work, freeze in front of the T.V., avoid going home, medicate with alcohol or other substances or addictions, or even change jobs or relocate to another city to avoid our problems or run away from them entirely. The truth is, though, as author J. R. R. Tolkien once said, “A [person] that flies from [their] fear may find that [they have] only taken a short cut to meet it.”

I do want to be clear however, I’m not suggesting that Mary, Joseph, and Jesus shouldn’t have fled to Egypt and I’m certainly not suggesting that one shouldn’t get out of an unhealthy relationship or leave a soul-sucking job if we’ve honestly faced the situation and determined that it is the necessary action needed to reclaim our life and move forward in a healthy way. I am saying, however, that the only real way out of a personal problem is to go through it. We have to face our problems head-on.

A nineteenth-century Hindu monk illustrated this point with a story. As he returned from visiting the temple, a group of monkeys ganged up on him, blocking his way. He considered running back, but saw more monkeys there. As their taunting grew louder and their attacks more menacing, the monk wasn’t sure what to do. Suddenly, he felt a voice saying, “Face them, face the animals.” The monk determined to face the monkeys and as he stared at them without fear, they ran away scared.¹

Today is New Year’s Day. It’s a day associated with fresh starts, new beginnings, and unattainable resolutions. Many will hope to wake up this morning with a clean-break from the past and a sincere hope that this will be a better year. The truth is, though, the problems that plagued us personally, in our community, or in our nation and world, did not belong to the year 2022. They are our problems and we can’t run away from ourselves; we can’t run headlong into a new year and hope to leave them behind. In reality though, the only way forward is through. We will have to face our problems head-on or they will continue to block our way forward.

¹ Swami Vivekananda. “Face Your Problems & They Will Run Away,” Aumamen.com, <http://aumamen.com/story/story-from-swami-vivekananda-face-your-problems-they-will-run-away>.

This New Year's, if you're planning to make a resolution, consider choosing to face whatever problem or whatever pain you've been avoiding or running from, head-on. It's painful. It's difficult. But on the other side, you will be able to move forward with your life and have the fresh start we all long for in the New Year. May God give us the courage to face whatever stands in our way. Amen.